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Spring is a great time to walk or bike to school

One of the advantages of living in a community like Leonia is that it's only 1.6 square miles in size, so most schools are within easy walking or biking distance for students. But driving to school appears to be the norm in Leonia, as anyone can attest who has attempted to navigate past one of the Borough's schools when endless lines of cars are dropping kids off in the morning.

Getting children--and adults--to walk more and drive less is the goal of the **Walk Leonia** campaign being launched by the Borough's Environmental Commission this spring. The Commission wants residents to know that vehicle dependence contributes to serious health issues that may begin at an early age.

Many kids don't get enough exercise

Nearly half of young people between ages 12 and 21 are not vigorously active on a regular basis, and about 14 percent of young people report no recent physical activity at all.¹ That could help explain why 31.5 percent of New Jersey children age 10 to 17 are overweight or obese -- higher than the national average.² Lack of exercise and being overweight can both contribute to type-2 diabetes, which is sharply on the rise among children and adolescents.³

Overweight children are also more likely to become obese adults who are at increased risk for heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, diabetes, some types of cancer and gall bladder disease.

"We're hoping to encourage everyone in Leonia to do more walking and less driving for the sake of their own health, the health of the community and the planet too," says Environmental Commission Chair Martha Lieblich. "By decreasing the amount of cars at school pick-up and drop-off points, we can not only decrease traffic congestion but also reduce the amount of car exhaust that pollutes our air."

Car exhaust makes kids sick

Vehicle exhaust contains toxic chemicals including fine particulates, carbon monoxide, nitrogen dioxide, benzene, formaldehyde, lead, ozone, and other substances that can cause serious health consequences. Nationwide, particulates and other auto emissions result in 20,000 to 46,000 cases of chronic respiratory illness, such as asthma, and 40,000 premature deaths each year.⁴ In New Jersey, fine particle pollution alone may actually cause more premature deaths than homicides and car accidents combined.⁵

Children are especially susceptible to the harmful effects of auto exhaust because they breathe up to 50 percent more air per pound of body weight than adults.⁵ That may help to explain why asthma rates among children have increased 160 percent in 20 years, with urban asthma rates even higher.⁶

Benefits of walking or biking to school

The Environmental Commission hopes that the **Walk Leonia** campaign will help encourage more children to make physical activity an integral part of their daily routine by walking or biking not only to school but also to other destinations around town like local parks, the library or the municipal pool.

Besides helping to control weight, build lean muscle, and reduce fat, walking and biking help kids to maintain healthy bones and joints and foster an improved sense of self-image and autonomy. Increasing physical activity is also believed to improve academic performance and alertness in youth.⁷

Walk Leonia Map

The campaign includes a special walking map of the Borough that shows how fast and easy it can be to get around town on foot. The map includes a Trip Tracker that invites kids to log the destinations to which they have walked and to jot down interesting things they notice along the way.

“We’re especially eager to have kids use our map to explore Leonia,” says Paul Leibow, a member of the Commission. “Maybe it will encourage them to go out walking or biking with their friends or family members and begin to appreciate their town from a new perspective.

To get them started, the Commission will be handing out the maps at their Leonia Day booth along with a limited number of free gifts for school-age children who stop by with their parents.

The Leonia Environmental Commission, one of the first environmental commissions in New Jersey, is appointed by the Mayor to advise the town on conservation, open space preservation, water resources, solid waste management and other environmental matters. The Commission meets on the first Wednesday of each month at 7:30PM in the Committee Room of the Leonia Borough Hall, 312 Broad Avenue. The public is welcome to attend. For information call 201-592-7887, email mliebllich@leonianj.gov or visit the Environmental Commission page on the Borough’s web site at www.leonianj.gov.

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¹CDC, Physical Activity and Health - <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/sgr/adoles.htm>

²National Initiative for Children’s Healthcare Quality - <http://www.nichq.org/pdf/ArchivedStateFactSheets/New%20Jersey03.pdf>

³Center for Disease Control, Children and Diabetes - <http://www.cdc.gov/diabetes/projects/cda2.htm>

⁴ SFDPH “Regional and Local Health Impacts of Driving” – April 2009: http://www.sfphes.org/HIA_Tools/Driving_Health.pdf

⁵ NJ Department of Health and Human Services “Gasping for breath: Fine particle pollution from diesel emissions is toxic to your health”

⁶ Surveillance for Asthma – United States, 1960-1995, MMWR April 24, 1998/47(SS-1); 1-28

⁷ CDC, The Importance of Regular Physical Activity for Children - http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/kidswalk/health_benefits.htm